

Communication Design Quarterly

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Notes from the SIG.....	4
Editor's Introduction: Aspects of Awareness: Considerations for Social Media Use in the Modern Context	8
Yik Yak and the Knowledge Community.....	11
Framing Illness Through Facebook Enabled Online Support Groups	22
Saving the Sea, Socially: Measuring the Relationship between Content and Gesture on Facebook...	32
Review: Mapping Experiences: A Guide to Creating Value through Journeys, Blueprints, and Diagrams.....	44
Review: Managing Chaos: Digital Governance by Design.....	49

Communication Design Quarterly

Communication Design Quarterly (CDQ) is the peer-reviewed research publication of the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) Special Interest Group on Design of Communication (SIGDOC). CDQ seeks to be a premier source on information and communication design for individuals in industry, management, and academia. CDQ contains a mix of peer-reviewed articles, columns, experience reports, and research summaries on topics of communication and information design, and it is archived in the ACM Digital Library.

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Welchman, L. (2015) *Managing Chaos: Digital Governance by Design*. New York: Rosenfeld Media.

In the book *Managing Chaos: Digital Governance by Design*, Lisa Welchman provides both rationale and method for establishing a framework for digital governance. The freedom and chaos of digital environments are a major challenge to organizations (whether external social media and web portfolios or the complexity of intranets and content management), especially when mixed with the politics and dynamics of organizational cultures and hierarchies and the digital conservatism or progressivism of leaders and workers alike. Governance with a focus on “establishing clear accountability for digital strategy, policy, and standards” (p. vi) enables development and helps organizations end infighting over ownership by taking digital out of silos and creating teams with clear structures, responsibilities, and relationships.

Communication designers who have spent more than ten minutes browsing a university’s web site could find plenty of examples of an ungoverned web presence. For example, jarring design differences and variant content strategies at different levels of a confusing hierarchy. Or a single department’s haphazardly updated photo blog on a social networking site outside the university’s web domain as well as its identity guidelines. The variety of stakeholders means that Internet and intranet content alike are political and divisive. Who’s in charge? Who’s running the site here, really? Everyone and no one—that’s the sort of worst-case scenario that informs *Managing Chaos*.

Describing her experiences at Cisco Systems in the 1990s, Welchman points to the underlying digital problem in many organizations—decisions didn’t happen “because no one really

knew whose job it was to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’” (p. 7). Competing factions, lack of leadership, and stalled decision-making processes, she argues, ensure that web presences remain “technically incongruent, content-bloated, [and] low-quality” (p. 9). The text wrestles with a complex problem: How do organizations analyze, collaborate, and distribute the complex, mission-critical work of governing digital and keep stakeholders and user experience in mind? Her framework—more heuristic than process—presents communication designers with a way to create collaborative hierarchies that meet stakeholder needs, ensure production, and make clear, accountable decisions about digital principles and standards.

Chapter 1 defines digital governance broadly as “basic rules of engagement for digital” (p. 9). The day-to-day work of production must be separated from decision-making, she argues, because the workload and expense of managing websites, social, mobile, and internal technologies needs to be distributed throughout the organization. This decentralization necessitates clearly defined and communicated strategy, policy, and standards. These are produced separately and managed by different groups, but are crucially interrelated.

Strategy defines high-level principles and objectives for how an organization will leverage the Internet for its own goals, while policy are issue-centric manifestations of general strategy. Policy involves guidance statements, “guardrails that keep the organization’s digital presence from going off the road” (p. 13) on issues like accessibility, intellectual property, security, social media, or web records management. Finally, standards “articulate the exact nature of an organization’s digital portfolio” (p. 18). These, Welchman points out, are often the most common source of governance problems: especially contentious debate with stakeholders (a particular department or business unit) who think they should be the final decision-makers about templates, typography, or tools. A governance framework gives stakeholders a role to play in the process while clarifying decision-making processes. This chapter presents Welchman’s master heuristic for defining and describing who should be responsible for decision-making and input via a grid that she will return to throughout the

book. Communication designers will find this framework easy to replicate and customize.

Chapter 2 delineates the teams responsible for each part of the framework. Welchman sets up a hierarchical relationship between a core digital team—those big picture people who “conceptualize, architect, and oversee the *full* organizational digital presence” (p. 33)—and those distributed groups that are responsible for other, particular aspects of digital presence. The core team involves executive-level management with experience and authority over staff, budget, and strategy along with hands-on resource people with domain expertise in digital. The mixture is important here, so that digital experts are working with business and management experts who can talk about planning and resource management and have the authority to make decisions stick. These groups work mostly with strategy and policy while the distributed team works at the standards level and “extends and focuses the vision of the core team by implementing content and applications that map to specific business concerns” (p. 42). Beyond these hands-on workers are the working groups and committees made up of a mixture of core team people and stakeholders who work to vet and approve principles, discuss metrics, and brainstorm ideas. Though many communication designers may balk at the value of technology committees, Welchman notes that with clear goal and mission these temporary groups can add real value through input, providing teams, departments, and vendors the opportunity to make their needs clear to the core team as well as to designers, and developers.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 describe strategy, policy, and standards more closely, detailing important distinctions between the three and providing profiles to help identify leaders and stewards for each facet. This section of the text is especially useful as a collaboration framework, providing a heuristic for detailing roles and responsibilities for teams and leadership. Differentiating between those who have input and those who have decision power and deriving that structure from core digital principles are an important way to stop infighting. Central groups and stewards are responsible for decisions and strategy, while increasingly distributed and more diverse groups work on standards, alignment, and input. Communication designers will find a

hierarchy and rationale helpful in creating, defining, or balancing relationships and workflows between working groups with a variety of different functions.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 summarize design factors and roadblocks—all of those variables that affect and are influenced by the organization's specific model for governance. Welchman emphasizes the benefits of distributed teams, strong sponsorship, and advocacy with clear authority as ways to deal with corporate governance dynamics, organizational culture, and external demands that will result in a unique governance structure. These chapters also describe points of resistance—"We don't govern anything," or "those PhD. Professors just don't listen" (p. 144)—and outlines ways to mitigate them.

Finally, Chapters 9, 10, and 11 provide case studies of a multinational corporation, a government organization, and a higher education institution. These cases show the uniqueness of problems and the variety of solutions possible with the framework outlined in *Managing Chaos*. While Welchman concedes some organizations won't get to full governance, the text still offers "tactics that can be effective in helping improve digital operations" (p. 159). Even if an executive-level advocate doesn't emerge, Welchman's book should empower communication designers to help quantify the risks of ungoverned or poorly aligned digital presence and discuss why better digital quality is important with executives and management.

As a squarely practical text, practitioners from project managers to user experience experts and communication designers will find the book helpful for analyzing and developing collaboration and hierarchy in organizations. *Managing Chaos: Digital Governance by Design* provides a way of thinking about collaboration and decision-making that applies to agile and waterfall processes alike.

While clearly directed at the executive and management-level readers with authority to make decisions about budget, structure, and governance, this book is also written for communication designers and user experts—often "facilitators with no governing authority" but who know how to negotiate business, digital and deadlines and who might wish to make the case for governance (p.

46). For Welchman, when principles and parameters are clear, and when roles and responsibilities are defined, good work can get done and an organization can effectively “sustain their digital face” (p. 8). Communication designers interested in collaborative frameworks that allow them to align the goals of participatory and user-centered design with the interests of stakeholders will find this book useful.